

Steven Universe, vegetarianism, and media representation



My response to how some fans feel about Steven as a vegetarian. Cropped screencap from one of my favorite scenes from "Snow Day"

On December 23rd, "[Snow Day](#)," the 8th episode of *Steven Universe Future* (herein SUF), the mini-epilogue series to cap out the Steven Universe franchise, apart from possible games, aired on Cartoon Network. Among some fans there has been anger and annoyance with the line by one of series protagonists, Steven Universe (voiced by Zach Callison), in declaring to his friends/guardians, Pearl, Garnet, and Amethyst, that he has been a "vegetarian for, like, a month," saying it goes against his character and is "wrong." I'd like to defend this development, using existing canon, explain its importance in the show, and media representation of vegetarians. On this occasion, I have to laugh at [that article](#) in *VegNews* which claimed Pearl was a vegetarian because she is grossed out by eating and "...the only thing we see her consume is

tea...[and] we're willing to bet she's not adding honey or milk, either.”¹ Some of these sentiments are summarized from my Reddit comments.

Let's start with the episode itself. With that, warning of spoilers ahead for that episode if you have not seen this episode on Cartoon Network or any other platforms. As the episode begins, Steven is overworking himself, waking up early in the morning, preparing for a day full of activities to help those un-corrupted at the end of Season 5, helping them learn how to express themselves and enjoy themselves in a universe free of the repressive rule of dictators (as Steven [called them in "Familiar"](#)), figureheads at this point. He leaves the house without breakfast, only taking a protein shake, decides to not take his novelty backpack, and drives to the school after Pearl bundles him up for the cold, saying he had "[errands](#)" to do. When he comes back that night, the Gems (Pearl, Garnet, and Amethyst) greet him, trying to cheer him up, but he rejects their entreaties, rejecting activities and foods (like a pepperoni pizza) he enjoyed in the past. The next day, he wakes up at the same time, rejects his classic meal (a "[together breakfast](#)") as having "too much sugar," and tries to leave his house, but the snow stops him. As such, all the classes are cancelled, and he gets out his notebook to work on changes to the third-quarter schedule. Amethyst sees he is too stressed out and begins a game of Steven Tag, last featured in "[Keep Beach City Weird](#)," a season 1 episode, when each Gem tagged becomes "classic Steven" (i.e. Steven from seasons 1-5), later joined in by all the Gems. The episode ends with Steven, after he is tagged and turns into "classic Steven" criticizing his fellow Gems not seeing him as grown up but rather a kid. They come around to this and rightly apologize to him. He wakes up the next day and travels with Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl, riding all in the car together, Amethyst with her own protein shake!

Perhaps that summary doesn't do the episode complete justice, but it sets the stage for the next part of my analysis: the importance of Steven becoming vegetarian ([not a vegan](#)). Steven is changing and maturing just as the world is changing, as he isn't the same person as the one who liked shows like Dogcopter (or "pupcopter" which is one for younger children), ate meat, and used a [Cheeseburger backpack](#), like he did in the past. People like the cute, younger Steven but he is 17 years old now and fans should treat him that way. Without a doubt, he is putting a lot of

¹ At the same time, however, the article listed racial stereotype Apu in *The Simpsons*, Bobby in *King of the Hill*, Velma Dinkley in *Scooby-Doo*, Draculaura in *Monster High*, Doug Funnie from *Doug*, Heffer in *Rocko's Modern Life*; Dil, Chuckie, and Susie in *Rugrats*, Pac-Man, Eliza Thornberry in *The Wild Thornberrys*, Popeye, as some of the greatest "vegan cartoon characters." So, he got Pearl wrong, but perhaps he got these others right.

emphasis on his responsibilities, and it is stressing him out. You could even say that his rejection of a lot from the past [is dangerous](#). However, he is still making his own choices, just like every character, trying to cope with the stress, as he has “his own skin-care routine” noted by the fandom page for the episode. Steven’s development reminded me of Connie in her debut in “[Bubble Buddies](#),” who talked about how her parents won’t let her eat donuts because they have trans fats, although there is isn’t an exact parallel of course. He is cutting himself off from almost everyone, dedicating himself to his work, with Connie nor Lion making an appearance in the episode. I’ll expand on that a bit later.

Steven’s choice goes beyond [seeing](#) the error of his past ways (being a meat-eater) or the [possibility](#) he is like “every teen” now (he isn’t). He was acting [within](#) character, as some fans reminded us of how he acted during “[Warp Tour](#)” toward the Gems (the debut of Peridot, [an autistic character](#) like Entrapta):

In snow day he just gets kind of exasperated with the gems treating him like he’s still 12, which is a totally normal way for him to feel. Part of growing up involves growing out of old interests. In the end he was happy to join them playing the new updated Steven tag and bring them with him to help do errands, and the next episode [“[Why So Blue?](#)”] had Steven being his usual happy self enjoying art and dancing and singing and stuff. So Snow Day honestly wasn’t out of character for him imho.

This refutes [the claim](#) that he is “out of character” or the supposed “manipulating fan service” that some fans claimed. For those that say it’s a “betrayal” of his dad or of [the saying](#) “if every porkchop were perfect, we wouldn’t have hot dogs,” because that saying is supposed to be symbolic, and he is not the same as his dad, Greg, who can do what he wants. As one fellow user put it,

Steven has always been incredibly sensitive to the welfare of other living things, and that’s only grown as he’s gotten older. Honestly, for years now I’ve been predicting that he’d become a vegetarian eventually, although I wasn’t sure if they would ever actually say so on the show.

To be fully fair, [we should have](#) seen it coming. As Leah [said on Twitter](#), this should be a natural confusion based on all the hints in season 1 that “showed he was somewhat uncomfortable with meat.” Certain users [have cited](#) the cookout at the end of Change Your Mind, that Steven seemed to eat pepperoni pizza in “[Guidance](#),” and other examples (like [eating](#)

[a hotdog](#) in the openings to Season 1 episodes), we have to recognize that Steven has only been a vegetarian for ONE MONTH, so those examples are mute. Additionally, the time period between “Guidance” and “Snow Day” is not established, but is [more than a month](#), as its assumed to be winter in “Snow Day” but perhaps summer or fall in “Guidance.” Some have said that Sapphire may have made it snow, but I’m not sure she has that power, unless she worked with Lapis, of course, but Lapis didn’t appear in the episode, so I don’t know about that at all. He also had only potatoes and veggies during “[Rose Buds](#)” as one user [pointed out](#), another detail worth noting.

Some can say that the episode was “[depressing to watch](#)” or [grumble](#) about Steven supposedly “starting to become unlikable and that’s not good for your protagonist.” The latter especially is absurd because people disliked him at the beginning (and the show in general) BECAUSE Steven was annoying. As I noted elsewhere, there is no doubt that SUF has a different tone, but Steven and the Gems are trying to deal with the aftermath of their victory in “[Change Your Mind](#),” and enforce the victory, dealing with the changes. Additionally, the Steven Universe franchise, itself, is about people changing. Not everyone stays the same and even though Steven is changing, the other Gems (Amethyst, Pearl, and Garnet) don’t see it or fully recognize it, hence offending him with Steven tag, treating him like a kid. Steven [has felt](#) they don’t completely understand him in the past, so this isn’t a new sentiment. Those that say that Steven becoming vegetarian made them “[legitimately nauseous](#)” are about as bad as the person who argued with me on Twitter last week. I rather sympathize [with a fan](#) who said that the development is on-brand for Steven, adding that:

It shows growth and maturity; it shows that he finally understands the hypocrisy of “everyone is equal” but continues to contribute to animal agriculture. I know everyone won’t agree with me, and that’s okay.

Building upon this, I would say that his switch to vegetarianism, which is a recent development in the show, is an indication, among many others, that Steven is becoming more mature and modified, although not completely different from his youthful self. As [one reviewer put it](#), “the world strikes on and Steven is shifting with it.” Perhaps you could say he is doing a “[speed run to adulthood](#),” but he is growing and changing, with the show [striking](#) a much more mature tone. This is understandable because has a lot of work to do to [maintain the “established peace across the stars,”](#) disbanding the “tyrannical and colonizing ways” of the Diamonds “to

improve Gem life on the Gem Homeworld and Earth,” as it is an ongoing struggle in [an imperfect universe](#).

It’s not flimsy that Steven is vegetarian, it’s awesome, showing a degree of maturity on his part and [a representation](#) of change in and of itself. I don’t need funny [memes](#) to tell me that either. Sure, he needs therapy, without a doubt, which is a focus of later episodes. This brings me to the most important part of this post: representation. Before this episode, some of the best representation [vegetarians had in animated shows](#) was Lisa in “The Simpsons,” still a canon vegetarian and Stan in “South Park” (not a canon vegetarian), so it should be praised that the Crewinverse and Rebecca Sugar allowed this representation in a show [with great LBGTO representation](#) in the past, meaning that has done a good step forward. More than that, this shows “natural growth, hes becoming a teen and changing” [as one user](#) put it, and fits with his generally pacifist attitude and/or adopting the ideals of his mother who seemed to love all living things.

You [could say](#) that Steven’s line about vegetarian is a throwaway line. It’s not like Lisa Simpson who had [a whole episode](#) dedicated to her vegetarianism (“[Lisa The Vegetarian](#)“) where Lisa reaches a compromise with her father, Homer, while spending the “majority of the show being ridiculed and ostracized by her family and friends.” That leads to some songs like “[you don’t win friends with salad!](#)” chanted by Bart, Marge, and Homer. At the same time, Lisa [disrupts](#) a community event, is “saved” by vegetarians, with her belief tolerated but “for the price of no longer being a vegetarian outcast and being accommodated,” in a show that has a strong tolerance for meat eaters. You could say that Lisa’s moral outrage is muzzled. In fact, if we use Frinkiac as a measurement, the only other episodes that even mention the word “vegetarian” are in Homer’s Phobia ([in passing](#)), Blame It On Lisa (Homer [tries](#) to convince Lisa to cheat on vegetarianism), Grade School Confidential (Bart [threatens](#) her with violating her values), Lisa’s Wedding (a [vision](#) of the future), and [jokingly](#) elsewhere. This is still often cited as an example of representation in media of vegetarianism and veganism.² I think the [one critic](#) who noted that

² Allyson Koerner, for instance, [lists Lisa](#) along with Monroe in *Grimm*, Phoebe Buffay in *Friends*, Angela Martin in *The Office*, Sara Sidle in *CSI*, and Temperance Brennan in *Bones*. [Others list](#) Hazel Grace Lancaster in *The Fault in Our Stars*, Rachel Berry in *Glee*, Phoebe Buffay in *Friends*, Angela Martin in *The Office*, Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*, Britta Perry in *Community*, Phoebe Halliwell in *Charmed*, Topanga Lawrence in *Boy Meets World*, and Todd Ingram in *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*, alongside Lisa as vegan/vegetarian characters. Kristen Martin, on the other hand, [notes five fictional vegetarians](#) who “defy stereotypes” while Jamie Gerber [explains](#) various superheroes and villains who are vegetarian (Todd Ingram, Damian Wayne, Iron Fist, Connor Hawke, Bruce Banner, Magneto, Zatanna, Scarlet Witch, Superman, Kitty Pryde, Ozymandias, Beast Boy, Karolina Dean, Animal Man, and Wonder Woman).

while it seems to be preachy, it is “overflowing with great individual scenes: the opening trip to Storytown Village; Lisa’s revelatory moment at the dinner table” with the Meat Council propaganda video as “the funniest isolated segment in the history of the show”:



The fact that Steven is a vegetarian now is positive and [fits](#) with existing canon. It’s really about [damn time](#) for this development, even if it is, ultimately, “[pretty insignificant](#)” in the show itself. Likely Steven will be like Mr. Peppy in *Futurama*: he’ll be vegetarian but not “[preachy about it](#).” Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting, in part because it puts Steven among [other noteworthy](#) vegetarian cartoon characters like Tish Katsufakis in *The Weekenders* and Aang in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the latter compared to Steven.³ While it’s hard to say that someone like Marceline the Vampire Queen in *Adventure Time* is vegetarian, we could easily assume that Perfuma, the hippy princess in *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, is vegetarian, and maybe even Lapis and Peridot in *Steven Universe*, if they eat food at all, like [in fan fics of my friend](#), lol. Of course, that’s just speculation. On an additional level, this is important due to [the “pattern](#) of vegetarians making people uncomfortable in the media” (indicated by annoyance

³ Some on My Anime List have claimed that Rei Ayanami in *Evangelion*, Taikoubou from *Houshin Engi*, herbivores in *Monster Musume*, a vegetarian elf in *Isekai Shokudou*, Nadia in *Fushigi no Umi no Nadia*, characters in *Nichibros*, *Denpa Onna*, *Kemono Friends*, *Happy Happy Clover*, *Hamtaro*, and *Shirokuma Cafe*, the latter three only if animal characters count, along with the *Circumstances of a Vegetarian Child Werewolf*.

from some parts of the SU fanbase in response in “Snow Day”), along with common “negative representation of vegetarians and vegans in the media.” This episode counters that sentiment on its head. I am reminded of [But I’m a Cheerleader](#), a great film if you haven’t seen it already where the emissary of the conversion therapy camp, “True Directions,” Mike, declares that vegetarianism is a “homosexual tendency.” It’s so absurd I have to laugh.

The fact Steven is a vegetarian is not only confirmed by further developments, like Steven eating a cheese pizza at the end of “Prickly Pair,” but fits with two episodes which aired on December 28, the last two SUF episodes before the beginning of the hiatus, likely less than previous hiatuses in 2019, which was, by far, “[CN’s most sparse release schedule](#) for the show as they released the show in three chunks with massive hiatuses in between” as one fan noted in their statistical analysis of the show. We are all, clearly, [being Spinel’d](#), but that’s beside the point, lol. There has been a lot of chatter about these episodes. The first of these, “[Little Graduation](#),” begins with Steven looking happy and overjoyed, a good sign to see due to everything he is been through. But this [doesn’t last long](#): he is quickly depressed by the fact that his friends Sadie and Lars are not together as he had imagined in his mind (he was literally shipping them, like a [sizable portion](#) of the fanbase), with Sadie now dating a [non-binary](#) individual named Shep (which would [may make](#) Sadie pansexual or queer), voiced by Indya Moore, Lars & the Off Colors are going back to space, and sadly...Sadie Killer & the Suspects are breaking up!⁴ The latter development is no surprise, however, as Buck Dewey predicted this in “[The Big Show](#)” where he said that their rise to stardom will be “followed by the inevitable infighting and creative disagreements that will tear us apart in a beautiful explosion of emotions,” which Greg dismissed as hogwash. It didn’t pan out exactly this way, but the band still broke apart, nonetheless. Anyway, in “[Little Graduation](#),” Steven’s emotions get the better of him and he almost kills everyone by suffocation, [turning into Pink Steven](#), including the new graduates [with a rose-colored dome](#), which is only stopped when Shep tells Steven that he needs to figure himself out and give his friends space to grow rather than suffocating them (literally). Symbolically the dome represents, as [one fan put it](#), “Steven’s inner perceptions of reality” since he has always worked hard for his friends, but now his friends are growing up without help from

⁴ Some fans [adored Shep](#) and [loved](#) the representation, while others [didn’t get](#) their gender and [thought](#) Shep was transgender (there’s no indication that is true), or [hated](#) Shep for some reason, the latter falling into the category of “[annoying fans](#).”

him (and moving on), as he feels neglected, combined with abrasive feelings he has toward his mom along with his own problems. And the toxicity bubbles up into a dome itself.

This episode was one of the best so far, as Steven realizes that not only does the world not revolve around him, but things happen when he isn't there. At one point, he asks when Lars and Sadie talked, declaring angrily, "but when did this happen? I didn't see any of this!" to which the response is that it was private, which makes sense. This also pokes at the fact that the show is all from Steven's perspective. I think [the parallels](#) between Lars leaving Steven and Pink leaving Spinel behind is a good one, which portends problems in the future without a doubt! Anyway, after freeing them and [everyone departing](#), the episode ends as he contemplates by himself, in a scene reminiscent of the ending of "Mother Simpson" as AwestruckVox [pointed out](#) in his analysis on *The Roundtable*. In the latter, Homer sits and pensively stargazes, realizing that "Homer's long-lost mother [may disappear again](#), but he learns that she loves him, and that's enough," with the ending serving as "a model of restraint and a signal to start crying...[and] a sobering reminder of how powerful silence can be."



The focus on Steven's issues is continued in "[Prickly Pair](#)," where Steven uses his new hobby, planting, as a form of therapy, connecting with his love of nature and life (another reason he is vegetarian). The Gems see this as clearly unhealthy, as he is naming plants after his friends [likely a reference](#) to the "stress free environment" (see up to 1:04 in the video above) created by

Billy Rosewood (played by Judge Reinhold) in *Beverly Hills Cop 2*, and [give him space](#), as he thinks he can solve all these problems himself, bumping through his [teen years](#). This doesn't work out, ultimately, as he [forms](#) a cactus monster who he treated like a therapist, which [hurts his friends](#) (or guardians as you could call them), Amethyst, [Garnet](#), and Pearl, not only physically but emotionally as the monster blurts out his personal feelings about them. While the cactus monster, which Amethyst names [Cactus Steven](#), leaves his house, blowing off the front face of it, similar to the damage it sustained during the battle with Blue Diamond in "[Reunited](#)," Steven is [clearly](#) in emotionally (and [mentally](#)) rocky state by the end of the episode. You could even say that Steven and Cactus Steven [represent](#) part of the cycles of abuse. The [absence](#) of his father, Greg, his girlfriend, [Connie](#) (I hope they don't [break up](#)), and others, is disturbing enough, as the feeling he can't talk to anyone about problems, [likely suffering from depression](#) and other mental problems.⁵

"Little Graduation" and "Prickly Pair" set up an interesting set of episodes ahead, even [if you think](#) SUF isn't "kid-friendly" anymore (as the fan base [is growing up](#)) as Steven will have to come to a [more balanced](#) state of mind and body (as he is acting a [bit contradictory](#) right now) working out his [serious](#) problems, making it [possible](#) for him to control his new powers, realizing that he [should change](#), just as everyone else is changing, something he hasn't completely done

⁵ I think it's [worth quoting](#) the psychological analysis of Steven by one fan here, as it says more than I could put forward:

What is happening to Steven right now is a consequence of three situations:

-Being a half gem.

-Being adolescent.

-Trying to carry the weight of other people problems in your back

Why you ask? in adolescence, you try to wonder who you are, what you want to be in the future. And sometimes that bring negative emotions like anger and confusion.

Before Steven Universe Future, his reason to be was to be a hero, helping others. Now, that reason is partly gone because the worst part of the conflict is over, and even when he still wants to help people, he looks at the lives of other humans and starts to wonder what else could be.

That's it because as a crystal gem, fighting and helping comes as something natural; and in the context of their long life spans this objective doesn't seem to change much. In the counterpart, humans tend to change life perspective more frequently because we live less, and our fragility doesn't make us want to fight intergalactic conflicts (instead, we choose to share with others, get jobs, and try to enjoy life).

In the initial part of the show, things seem "inverted" because humans gave Steven a sense of continuity ("i want this to stay the same"), and gems a sense of something that needs to be changed ("i want this to be different"). When we reach SUF, humans are changing and gems are remaining the same (mainly enemies), so Steven starts to be greatly frustrated.

He doesn't want to recognize this, clearly, because he is the person that "helps", not the one that needs to be helped (that would mean he is a burden to others). So, his emotions (anger and confusion, normal for adolescence) start to emerge as unstable powers, which causes a mayhem so big that Steven has to begin to recognize his emotions.

PD: So...if you have superpowers and feel like this...go therapy.

yet. This would be much better than forcing others to [not change](#), which is not healthy at all! Whether he [talks the Diamonds](#) about this (oh no) or his [“uncle” Andy](#), or someone else about his problems is anyone’s guess.⁶ This is nothing new as he had similar struggles as shown in episodes like “[Mindful Education](#),” and [other times](#) before that, but the fact that he has the power to hurt others is scary, so I’m excited to see what future SUF episodes will bring. Perhaps Steven [should take the advice](#) he told Lars back in Season 5 to heart, although he may not.

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Update:

I am so glad to get [one positive comment on /r/stevenuniverse](#), which makes me smile. I am glad to see it.

⁶ Some fans hope Steven lies on a bed [at the end of the series](#) and talks to a therapist, while others [just say](#) he needs “[serious therapy](#).”